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ABSTRACT

The study of semantics, the study of meaning, promises more complete communicative thought transfer if several problem areas can be solved or at least generally agreed upon. The problem of exact definition of words arises from the fact that no one work is the exact equivalent of another. However, the study of many languages forces the mind to conceive of slightly new shades of meaning and reduces the problem of equivalence that remains within only one language. Another difficulty arises, however, upon the realization that much of the meaning of language emerges from its structure. Other problem areas requiring further study involve denotation and connotation, differing understandings of meanings due to differing cultures or social standings of the users, and meaning variation resulting from "occasional" language--language used only on specific occasions such as formal state dinners. (CH)

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the problem of meaning

by Arthur Rex Barrell

In most linguistic manuals, semantics, or the study of meaning has long occupied a secondary place. If treated at all, it is considered to be a by-product of linguistics, a sort of enfant terrible which has been recalcitrant to definition and defiant of categorization. Yet this study is of paramount importance in the analysis of language but independent of any well thought-out levels approach. It permeates all levels, but despite attempts to structure it, it has so far eluded the efforts of the theoreticians to capture all its myriad and imponderable facets.

Semantics deals with the relations between thing, word and thought and it is this third element which being non-definable in linguistic terms upsets the scientific apparatus. It is the study of meaning, but until we can define the meaning of meaning to our linguistic rather than to our philosophical satisfaction, it will remain an enigma. Since meaning can be conveyed in non-linguistic ways, for example through gestures, the problem of definition is much more complex. Rather than attempt to seek this here, we shall content ourselves with indicating a few aspects of the problem which could be of interest.

Except in onomatopoeic situations there is no direct connection between word and thing, or between what linguists call the linguistic symbol and the referend (the thing, or experience referred to). The most usually accepted definition of language is that it is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by which members of a speech community communicate with or another. *Arbitrary*, because of this lack of connection between symbols and referends. There is a link however, a link provided by our thinking processes. In uttering the word *cat*, I indicate that I am thinking of the animal in question; I *refer* to it; *cat* symbolizes my thought of it.

While language is arbitrary it is also strangely enough, non-arbitrary in the sense that an individual cannot indulge in an arbitrary use of the various symbols.* If I

look at a cat and say to my friend—Look at the dog—he will think I am sick and communication will already have been impaired. The reason for the use of one particular symbol or construction is not in what is to be expressed but in firstly the history of the language and secondly the system of the language. The French word for *cat* is *chat* not because *chat* is a sequence of sounds particularly suitable to refer to a cat, but because firstly the word comes from Latin *cattus*, and secondly if a Frenchman changed one or all of these sounds, he would no longer be understood as referring to a *cat*. Language is a *system* because words cannot be used in any order, nor is speech merely a temporal sequence of isolated words. A system pre-supposes organized thought, goal-directed activity, and its use leads to communication and intelligibility.

**Note:* Some scholars use the word *signs* rather than *symbols* and here is the very crux of the matter. Most words do not have an identical meaning for two different people. Apart from this however, it is better to avoid the word *sign* which is more precise than *symbol* and can be used in many different ways. For example we say that a dark sky is a sign of rain, a sore throat is a sign of an approaching cold, and so on.

The constitution of the dictionary leads the linguistic novice to a false and facile impression of equivalence and this is one of the chief stumbling blocks in the learning process. Since we all think differently, we have different concepts of referends and though they may use the same symbol, which as we have seen is both arbitrary and non-arbitrary, the meaning is never the same even for people speaking the same language. Meaning is colored by our experiences. For example, we may at some point have been guilty of running over a little white poodle. The accident may have produced such a traumatic impression that thereafter the word *dog* conjures up a white poodle in contrast say to a large German shepherd dog. If we have ourselves been involved in an automobile accident, the word

AS 500 458

crash will have a vastly different association for us than for the person who has never experienced this unfortunate happening. Every new experience can lead a speaker to use a new word or to use an old word in a different way.

What is *work* for one person may be *play* or *leisure* for another. How much more difficult it is then to translate accurately a word in a language other than our own! The dictionary leads us to imagine superficially that there is an equivalent for each word in the native tongue though we may have progressed to the sophisticated point of realizing that in both languages one word may have to be translated different ways according to the context. Even here, there is no real equivalence. The various influences that affect a speaker's choice of this word or another are up-bringing, education, tradition, experience, occupation, social standing, personal taste.

If then, the sphere of semantic reference is so different for different speakers, how do we ever manage to communicate with one another, let alone with a speaker of another nationality?

There are a minimum number of activities which every normal English speaking person would agree (to use our earlier example) was *work*. Now this is not to say that we need necessarily to agree with the speaker that what he refers to as work is our concept of the word. Activity whether in the garden or the mines or in the kitchen may be work to one and recreation to another, but communication can flow from the contextual situation. If we say to our friend — We worked in the garden during the weekend — he may reply — Oh, I don't consider *that* work! — In other words, in the speaking situation the word will be used in a construction and can in addition be qualified by appropriate modifiers. We can for example engage in pleasant and unpleasant work, happy or unhappy play. But the normal person would agree that work is an activity further explained in a speech situation.

This minimal content or kernel may well be a scholarly abstraction but it is the corner-store of communication. Substitute another abstraction (e.g. thought—I thought in the kitchen during the weekend) and though it may be *grammatically* correct in

the same situation, is semantically nonsensical and communication is broken. When one considers the factors involved in the choice of a particular word, one can see how difficult it is to analyze objectively the meaning of any word. Unlike form, meaning is personal, and often illogical. Very few terms have a fixed or what one could call an artificial meaning (legal and technical terms such as a *codicil* in law are the obvious exceptions); many have a meaning that goes back through tradition and is the result often of muddled thinking and feeling (e.g. silly). With the help of maybe only a few hundred words each day spoken and thought (let us not forget that we *think* in symbols) we attempt to enumerate our various experiences, activities and contacts and these may well vary with each new day. So we use new words of new combinations of words that are often unlikely to tally with those of others who may have had different experiences or who will, at least, record differently the same order of experience (no two people may ever have exactly the same experience). And further complication may come from the fact that our attitude to things and to people changes far more rapidly than the symbols we use.

All our numerous experiences are classified under headings in one of the most complex of all computers — our brain, with its fantastic memory bank and ability to retrieve and classify information and data. All our experiences are codified and grouped under headings such as *work, town, love, to go away*, often referred to as linguistic files. These constitute our mental world and are constantly checked, consulted modified. For example, all types of jobs which we call *work* are combined in one unit with definite boundaries which are different from those marked by other units such as *profession* or *labour*. These files are not personal in the sense that they are elaborated by one person in accordance with his needs and observations but have been worked out in the course of many generations. Our personal thoughts can of course lend color to the files (personal style) but we can bring no significant change into them. It is a truism that the influence of one person on a language is negligible, for if his individual speech deviates too much from the norm, he fails to communicate. The criterion is neither logic nor scientific method, but intelligibility. Files reflect the way in which the great mass of

people have felt and thought in the past; they are the sum total of experiences, associations, superstitions, and impressions however illogical, contradictory, vague, and illusory these may have been. When our brain consults these files we are drawing on our whole civilization, our total spiritual inheritance. In the case of our own language, the vocabulary is based on the English cultural heritage, the heathen Germanic past, Roman civilization, Christianity, the Renaissance, exploration, industrial revolution, the rise and fall of the British Empire, the progress of modern science and technology, social reform, political ideology, economic changes and so on. And since every language has a different history, every language has a quite different set of linguistic files. One of the great benefits of foreign language learning is that, because experiences are grouped differently in different languages, the student is forced to think about familiar experiences in different ways. The word *school* in English conjures up a particular group of experiences which no exact equivalent in French for instance will reflect. *Ecole* and *lycee* though roughly equivalent to public school and high or grammar school have a different set of files in French. One needs to be familiar with the different educational system in England or America and France to appreciate this difference and also the distinction between *college* and *college*. *Town* and *city* are not exactly *ville* and *cite* while Spanish with its different outlook on settlement groupings will use such various words as *villa*, *ciudad*, *pueblo*, *aldea*, *poblacion*. Abstract words such as *reason*, *respect*, which express spiritual qualities are particularly recalcitrant to translation into other languages. *Pride* in English covers a wide field and would be in French either *vanite*, *fierte*, *orgueil*, *morgue*, or *amour-propre*, depending on context. Vice versa, *titre* in French has many other meanings than English *title*. *Conscience* in French can be variously translated in English as *conscience*, *consciousness* or *conscientiousness*. Many words have simply no counterpart in other languages. We need only mention English *self-conscious*, French *cristallisation*, German *Gemutlichkeit*, *Weltanschauung*, Greek *tyche*, Latin *virtus*.

Words for family relationships in the North Germanic languages are particularly interesting to study from this viewpoint. Whereas *uncle*, *oncle* (French), *zio* (Italian),

onkel (German) and *aunt*, *tante* (French), *zia* (Italian), *Tante* (German) give no indication of gender relationship (i.e. whether the relationship goes through father or mother), it is quite otherwise in Danish, Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish. And similarly with nephews, nieces, grandfathers and grandmothers. Further, in old Germanic family bonds were of greater importance socially than today. Old Icelandic, for example, had words for certain pairs of relatives (e.g. *feðgar* — father and son; *moetgar* — mother and daughter; *foðgin* — father and daughter; *moefin* — mother and son). The following examples taken from Swedish clearly show this aspect of family relationship:

farbror	(father's brother)
faster	(father's sister)
brorson	(brother's son)
brordotter	(brother's daughter)
farfar	(father's father)
farmor	(father's mother)
morbror	(mother's brother)
moster	(mother's sister)
systerson	(sister's son)
systerdotter	(sister's daughter)
morfar	(mother's father)
mormor	(mother's mother)

This distinction was not unknown in Latin:

patruus	(brother of father)
amita	(sister of father)
avunculus	(brother of mother)
matertera	(sister of mother)

Thus the study of a foreign language forces the mind to use the new files and become aware of other qualities in experience or other affinities than those stressed by the mother-tongue. It is always a healthy mental exercise to attempt to view the world from more than one angle.

It is useful in any study on meaning to make a clear distinction between lexical and structural meaning. Charles Fries in his *Structure of English*, 1952, states that "the grammar of a language consists of the devices that signal structural meanings". Structural meanings are those which are conveyed by patterns of arrangement and the selection of form classes, as contrasted with lexical meanings, the meanings of the forms themselves.

Consider the French sentence — *J'insiste que vous veniez a ma maison*. An Englishman would say—I insist on your coming to

my house. Now it is possible to replace the lexical item *insiste* by *voudrais*, *exige*; the item *veniez* by *pensiez*, *parliez*, the item *ma* by *sa*, *notre*, the item *maison* by *lettre*, *ami* without changing the structure. The final sentence could be *Je voudrais que vous parliez à notre ami*. It is to be noted that a certain identity of meaning is kept constant—I, would like, want, you to do something. This part is not identical with the sum of the lexical meanings of the terms involved but it is the meaning of the structure or the structural meaning of the pattern. Thus structure can be defined as the common element of different sentences or phrases which have the same structural meaning. The only constants in the sentence above are the function words *Je . . . que . . . à*, and the endings indicating grammatical relationships. Thus structural meaning has something to do with whether a sentence is a statement, question or request, with the rôles played by the various items mentioned and the relative time at which something is said to be true.

This type of structural meaning independent of the lexical items can be seen in so-called nonsense sentences. For example in the following sentences:

The rilish greams borted the rones minously.

Les grêmes rîleux bortaient les rônes minusement, none of the words (save *the* and *les* appear in the English or French dictionary. Yet the grammatical system of the two languages allows the various combinatory patterns of consonants and vowels and the markers (*the*, *les*; *-ish*, *-cux*; *-ed*, *-aient*; *-s*; *-ly*, *-ment*) as well as the order in which the various items appear give the sentences the appearance of sensible statements. There is even a vague meaning which derives from certain associations aroused by the phonic shape of these artificial words; some unpleasant creatures performed an unkind act (possibly repeated) upon other probably inoffensive beings.

A further distinction in the realm of meaning should also be made between *denotation* or the meaning a form has for all those who use it, and *connotation* or the special additional meaning the same form may have for some one speaker or for certain speakers. Denotation is the lexical meaning of items stated objectively in dictionaries. Connotation is primarily a matter

of social or cultural standing. For example the forms *I seen* and *I saw*, *he ain't* and *he isn't* have the same denotation but different connotations. In general we make a distinction at the cultural level between standard or socially acceptable language, and non-standard which includes sub-standard or not socially acceptable language. Among non-standard are a number of different levels such as urban sub-standard (T'oity-t'oid street) and rural dialect (Scottish-*hae nane*).

Apart from cultural levels are what are known as functional varieties of speech, determined not by the cultural standing of the speaker but by their use in speaking or writing and differing according to the degree of familiarity they connote. Some words or phrases can be used only in formal situations (e.g. the subjunctive in expressions like *inadvisable as this may be considered* or lexical items like *quintessence* which have been taken over largely from Greek or Latin by learned scholars), while the majority are in familiar use. These two contrasts (between standard and sub-standard and between formal and familiar) produce four main types of usage known as familiar standard (e.g. he did it too soon), formal standard (he did it prematurely; am I not?), familiar sub-standard (he done it too soon; ain't I?), formal sub-standard (between you and I). Archaisms, foreignisms and technical terms are types of connotation and of course technical terms have all kinds of different connotations depending on the social standard of the calling. Slang is simply another name for a very familiar type of connotation.

These then are a few of the aspects of semantics which come directly into the purview of the linguists. The future of the study as a science is uncertain. Ogden and Richards (*The Meaning of Meaning*), Kozzyski (*Science and Sanity*) and later writers such as Chisholm, Hayakawa, I. Lee, W. Johnson have laid the foundations for a scientific study of semantics whose central idea is the importance for mental health of adopting a scientific orientation toward reality. Ullmann is first and foremost a linguist and his works on semantics show the important role which meaning must play in any linguistic theory. It may hold the key to the understanding of the different cultures of mankind.

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Arthur Rex Barrell is Professor and Chairman of the Department of Languages, University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada. He received his B.A., B.S., and M.A. Magna Cum Laude, from the University of Canterbury, New Zealand; his Certificate d'études pratiques from the Institut de Phonétique, Paris France; and his Ph.D. from the University de Paris, France.

Dr. Barrell has lectured for the Department of Modern Languages, University of Otago, New Zealand; Department of French,

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He has received numerous grants, including the Nuffield Traveling Fellowship in 1958, Carnegie Corporation Travel Grant in 1962, British Council Visitorship in 1966, Canada Council Short-term Research Grant 1966, Canada Council Grant (Learned Societies) in 1967, H.R.C. (manuscript publication) in 1968, and Canada Council Research Grant in 1969.

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His current research involves a *Lexicological Manual for Students of French and English*, "Horace Walpole et la France," "Bolingbroke et la France," and "German Element in French Vocabulary." He is also qualified in the area of Piano and Theory of Music.